

It Takes One Spark

Whenever I meet with natural resource professionals from across America, I like to ask one question that pries into their past. It's nothing personal. I am just curious how all of these professional wildlife biologists, forest managers, ecologists, park rangers, wetlands specialists and conservation police got their start doing what they do for a living. Sometimes I'll ask leaders of conservation groups, or longtime volunteers who've devoted thousands of hours to the protection and management of our wild resources. One doesn't choose to spend a lifetime in conservation on a mere whim. I'm curious to learn what got them started.

"Where did you get your start?" I ask.

Out of habit, most of these professionals respond by reciting their college majors and the universities they attended. It's where, they're convinced, their professional life in conservation began. But I respond by suggesting that's probably not what got them started. What I want to know is how these experts who study, manage and protect our natural resources came to decide they wanted to devote their life to nature, to be a biologist, or a forester, or a park ranger, and so on.

"Did someone inspire you at an early age?" I ask.

They begin recalling their childhood and pleasant memories, long before they became professionals, years before they went off to college to earn these official career titles. They often open up with a personal confession.

"I was just a kid," a gray-headed biologist might say unashamedly. "It was my grandfather. My grandfather liked to fish..."

These childhood stories might be solitary fragments of memories of a particular moment of wonder—a trophy largemouth bass caught in a nearby farm



pond with their father and younger brother. It was a triumph never forgotten. Or a forest ecologist might tell the story of being taught as a child how to age a tree.

"My kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Coffman," the ecologist might reveal with open sentimentality. "One day she taught us how to tell how old a tree was by counting the

rings. I never forgot that."

All of us who appreciate nature share similar stories of these incredible, life-changing moments. They were sparks of inspiration somebody took the time to share. Today these lessons might seem perfectly ordinary and simple: an adult teaching us to catch fireflies, a camping trip to a state park, or a field trip where we were allowed to walk into the woods alone or through a restored prairie at a local nature center. All of it could easily be dismissed as routine and unimportant. As serious grown-ups, we believe ourselves to be far too experienced to be moved by what moved us as children—until we take a moment to remember the original influences that led us to become the people we became.

As adults, we often convince ourselves we deliberately chose to become the people we became, or that we were born to do exactly what we do, as if appreciating nature were inevitable providence. But none of us grows up without being affected by the influences of everybody we meet. And for those of us who were lucky enough to have known someone who gave us the opportunity to discover nature, we must be forever grateful.

For me, my career as a natural resources professional began as a child while exploring my grandfather's farm in central Illinois, camping with my parents and grandparents at state parks. There were fishing trips with my father and uncle. Later influences included my first pheasant hunt and reading the essays of Aldo Leopold in his classic "A Sand County Almanac." It's a gem of conservation wisdom, and continues to influence my priorities as I remind myself daily: "What would Aldo Leopold do?"

Now it's our turn to share the gift by passing on a tradition. As leaders, we bear the responsibility to give the next generation—as well as adults who never had the opportunities as children—that spark of inspiration about nature. Anyone can be a leader. Each of us has the ability to become that environmental hero in the eyes of others by performing even the simplest acts. The same lessons that astonished us as children—digging for fishing worms or discovering what lives underneath a rock in a forested stream—might lead someone toward their own life of conservation and protection of the natural resources we all treasure.

A stylized, handwritten signature in brown ink, reading "Marc Miller".

Marc Miller, Director

One of Director Marc Miller's fondest outdoor memories is Oct. 19, 1980, when, as an 11-year-old fishing with his father and younger brother, he landed a 7-pound largemouth bass.

